

## *The Garden, Sisterhood, and Growing Up*

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### DIGGING POTATOES

“Woah! Look at this one! Holy potato!” Beads of sweat are forming beneath my shoulder blades, sliding down my back as I smile at my four-year-old nephew’s excitement. We all pause to marvel at the rather large, muddy potato that he has just excavated from the freshly tilled ground with his tiny hands and eager, digging fingers.

“There has to be more where that one came from,” exclaims his older sister, just seven years old herself, as she thrusts a garden rake into the soft, crumbling earth. Watching the kids as they work through piles of dirt, my own older sisters and I beam at them with nostalgia. The hot, August sun beats down on our backs and brows, and I wipe a mustache of sweat from my face. It was not so many years ago that my sisters and I were the young, eager garden tools working and playing beneath all of the cotton tailed rabbits and puffing steam engines clumsily chasing each other across the sky. We continue this way: working, laughing, and joking. We even pause, at times, to playfully toss a particularly mammoth-sized clump of sticky, hardened mud at the nearest victim. We even give a wholehearted attempt at our own ridiculous, off pitched, rendition of “Margaritaville,” flower microphones and all. The baby sister of the children, not yet two years old, has just lost a flip-flop to the dark, mucky, soil. Four sisters have officially introduced the next generation to the joys of the garden, and flocks of birds twitter and tweet in joyous, approving song.

### STUCK IN THE MUD

Watching little Allie quietly struggle to retrieve her foot and sandal from the mud, I flash back to a summer several years ago, and think, *if only I had had such a relaxed reaction*. I am five years old again, with tear stained cheeks and a sore, throbbing throat that only several minutes of choking, hyperventilating, five-year-old screaming and crying can cause. My brand new sneaker is stuck in a foot of wet, mucky, mud, and I am not happy. After what seems like hours, my sister, Lora, approaches me. She is smiling that

devilish, sly grin that is learned as a teenager and is maintained throughout life. She silently works my sneaker out of the mud with patience that soothes me.

Lora understands me, and does not attempt to calm me down or make a joke of the situation. She lets me pull myself together, and knows not to say a word; she saves me the humiliation. Covered in mud, we trudge back up the hill, back home where nobody will ever know, and I smile at her with complete trust and admiration. Looking back at a time so long ago, it's hard to believe that I still find my sister to be such a reliable friend with the very same patience and understanding. I guess this is what happens when you are rescued in life. Now, I can only hope this holds true for my sister Molly and I, as I recall a time where I was the hero, and Molly was the one in need of rescuing.

## GARDEN WARRIOR

I'm staring down at my shoe laces, willing them to stay tied as I carefully make my descent to the garden. The rough cement path is older than I am, and its many years of use are showing. Loose bits of cement and sharp stone slide beneath my carefully placed feet as I step further down the hill to our garden. I look up, hesitantly, to catch a glimpse of the perfect rows of mountain corn and neatly planted tomatoes.

As I look up, I realize that the beauty I anticipated has been covered in darkness; all I see is black. I realize that I am not alone. Twenty feet ahead of me, a full-grown mother bear is sauntering up the hill. Fifteen feet away now; *what do I do?* For a moment, my size eight sneakers are glued to the earth. My heart is a grinding machine, pumping overtime, and my new friend seems to be having a similar experience. Finally, the bear turns, startled, and we both back step to safety.

Back at home, nobody is to be found; I have no bodyguard to escort me to the garden, which desperately needs to be harvested. At once, a thought hits me and all too suddenly sinks in; my oldest sister, Molly, is down in the garden with nobody to protect her aside from her hobbling, three-legged canine. A surge of anxiety is flushed out by adrenaline as I reach for the biggest butcher knife I can find. I march back outside, back down the hill, weapon wielded, ready to attack. I am ready to protect my sister, as I imagine the mother bear would be ready to protect *her* own, should we meet again. I am a warrior.

I'm a warrior, but under the surface, I'm nervous and I am scared. *What do I know about self-defense?* I've never come face to face with a bear in all of my years walking to

the garden. Yet I keep walking, my muscles fueled by concern for my sister. At last, I reach the base of the hill, and I trudge through the mud to the spot where Molly is picking candy-striped beets. She doesn't see me, and she doesn't hear me coming over her latest download from the NPR; it's a good thing I came. Had I not been so brave, Molly never would have seen the mother bear or her year old cub, which followed its mother's path several minutes later. I may not have ever realized just how strong I can be when my sisters need me.

Together, Molly and I spend the rest of the afternoon, soaking up the warm sun's rays, picking delicata squash and plump carrots with giant tree tops for greens; another day in paradise.

## SKIP THE GARDEN; LET'S GO TO THE POOL

"Mommy, can we *please* go to the garden today," Lily begs. The kids have been pestering us all morning to go check on how everything is growing. Cindi glares at them, then glances at Lora and I, begging for back up. We have spent all weekend in the garden, and the thought of spending another day covered in mud and sweat is not appealing at the moment. All we want to do is laze around and enjoy our last few days together as a family before Lora flies back home to Nevada. Lora, always the negotiator, has an idea that she hopes will please her nieces and nephew as well, as her sisters.

"Why don't we head across the street to the motel and take a swim in the pool," she ventures. *Is she crazy? It is absolutely freezing.* Cindi and I glower at her for a moment, and I know we are both thinking the same thing; *three little kids at an outdoor pool?* Despite our reservations, the decision is made. There is no unconvincing the kids now that the idea of swimming in the neighbor's pool has been uttered. Lora's logic is that she might as well get her money's worth from the motel for staying there for the last week.

It's decided, and we all trek across the street, hand in hand. Cindi and I, still slightly disgusted by the idea of swimming on such a cold day, have decided to skip on struggling into our bathing suits and act as onshore lifeguards once we arrive. After an hour or so of sitting along the edge of the pool, the sun begins to warm the day, and my sister and I begin to sweat. We sweat silently, not willing to admit that Lora and the kids were right in thinking that it would warm up, but we sweat. No matter where we sit around the pool, whether we sit in the shade or not, Cindi and I are baking. We are

hot radiators reaching squealing point, and everyone else is officially right. Yet, not willing to completely go down in flames, we devise a plan, whispering behind our hands in the shade.

“Ready,” Cindi whispers, “on the count of three.” We steady ourselves at the edge of the pool, shoulder to shoulder, and just as Lora and the kids turn their backs towards us, we begin to count.

“One . . . two . . . three,” we shout together and cannonball into the deep end of the pool: jean shorts, tee shirts, and all. The icy water stings as it wraps around my body, and we come to the surface choking, shivering, and laughing. There is probably not another moment in time where Cindi and I ever would have dared such a feat, and yet, here we are now. We are so proud of ourselves, and what’s more, we are pleased that Lora and the kids are completely shocked.

The cold, soggy walk home is only slightly embarrassing as dozens of out-of-town cars pass us with skeptical looks. Unfazed, our mother bursts out laughing as we guiltily walk across the carpet into the house. Today may not be the most earthmoving or life-changing day of my life. However, today is a day that will remain fondly in my memory as the day that Cindi and I set life aside and were giggling, childlike sisters once again. More than ever, I realize that no matter where life takes me, or my sisters, we will always have each other, the garden, and our memories of growing up to pass along to the next generation, in hopes that they will learn to love each other, life, and the garden as we do.